

SUETONIUS
THE LIFE OF OTHO

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VITA OTHONIS

(416) I. The ancestors of Otho were originally of the town of Ferentum, of an ancient and honourable family, and, indeed, one of the most considerable in Etruria. His grandfather, M. Salvius Otho (whose father was a Roman knight, but his mother of mean extraction, for it is not certain whether she was free-born), by the favour of Livia Augusta, in whose house he had his education, was made a senator, but never rose higher than the praetorship. His father, Lucius Otho, was by the mother's side nobly descended, allied to several great families, and so dearly beloved by Tiberius, and so much resembled him in his features, that most people believed Tiberius was his father. He behaved with great strictness and severity, not only in the city offices, but in the pro-consulship of Africa, and some extraordinary commands in the army. He had the courage to punish with death some soldiers in Illyricum, who, in the disturbance attempted by Camillus, upon changing their minds, had put their generals to the sword, as promoters of that insurrection against Claudius. He ordered the execution to take place in the front of the camp [\[670\]](#), and under his own eyes; though he knew they had been advanced to higher ranks in the army by Claudius, on that very account. By this action he acquired fame, but lessened his favour at court; which, however, he soon recovered, by discovering to Claudius a design upon his life, carried on by a Roman knight [\[671\]](#), and which he had learnt from some of his slaves. For the senate ordered a statue of him to be erected in the palace; an honour which had been conferred but upon very few before him. And Claudius advanced him to the dignity of a patrician, commending him, at the same time, in the highest terms, and concluding with these words: "A man, than whom I don't so (417) much as wish to have children that should be better." He had two sons by a very noble woman, Albia Terentia, namely; Lucius Titianus, and a younger called Marcus, who had the same cognomen as himself. He had also a daughter, whom he contracted to Drusus, Germanicus's son, before she was of marriageable age.

II. The emperor Otho was born upon the fourth of the calends of May [28th April], in the consulship of Camillus Aruntius and Domitius Aenobarbus [\[672\]](#). He was from his earliest youth so riotous and wild, that he was often severely scourged by his father. He was said to run about in the night-time, and seize upon any one

he met, who was either drunk or too feeble to make resistance, and toss him in a blanket [673]. After his father's death, to make his court the more effectually to a freedwoman about the palace, who was in great favour, he pretended to be in love with her, though she was old, and almost decrepit. Having by her means got into Nero's good graces, he soon became one of the principal favourites, by the congeniality of his disposition to that of the emperor or, as some say, by the reciprocal practice of mutual pollution. He had so great a sway at court, that when a man of consular rank was condemned for bribery, having tampered with him for a large sum of money, to procure his pardon; before he had quite effected it, he scrupled not to introduce him into the senate, to return his thanks.

III. Having, by means of this woman, insinuated himself into all the emperor's secrets, he, upon the day designed for the murder of his mother, entertained them both at a very splendid feast, to prevent suspicion. Poppaea Sabina, for whom Nero entertained such a violent passion that he had taken her from her husband [674] and entrusted her to him, he received, and went through the form of marrying her. And not satisfied with obtaining her favours, he loved her so extravagantly, that he could not with patience bear Nero for his rival. It is certainly believed that he not only refused admittance to those who were sent by Nero to fetch her, but that, on one (418) occasion, he shut him out, and kept him standing before the door, mixing prayers and menaces in vain, and demanding back again what was entrusted to his keeping. His pretended marriage, therefore, being dissolved, he was sent lieutenant into Lusitania. This treatment of him was thought sufficiently severe, because harsher proceedings might have brought the whole farce to light, which, notwithstanding, at last came out, and was published to the world in the following distich:--

*Cur Otho mentitus sit, quaeritis, exul honore?
Uxoris moechus caeperat esse suae.*

You ask why Otho's banish'd? Know, the cause
Comes not within the verge of vulgar laws.
Against all rules of fashionable life,

The rogue had dared to sleep with his own wife.

He governed the province in quality of quaestor for ten years, with singular moderation and justice.

IV. As soon as an opportunity of revenge offered, he readily joined in Galba's enterprises, and at the same time conceived hopes of obtaining the imperial dignity for himself. To this he was much encouraged by the state of the times, but still more by the assurances given him by Seleucus, the astrologer, who, having formerly told him that he would certainly out-live Nero, came to him at that juncture unexpectedly, promising him again that he should succeed to the empire, and that in a very short time. He, therefore, let slip no opportunity of making his court to every one about him by all manner of civilities. As often as he entertained Galba at supper, he distributed to every man of the cohort which attended the emperor on guard, a gold piece; endeavouring likewise to oblige the rest of the soldiers in one way or another. Being chosen an arbitrator by one who had a dispute with his neighbour about a piece of land, he bought it, and gave it him; so that now almost every body thought and said, that he was the only man worthy of succeeding to the empire.

V. He entertained hopes of being adopted by Galba, and expected it every day. But finding himself disappointed, by Piso's being preferred before him, he turned his thoughts to obtaining his purpose by the use of violence; and to this he was instigated, as well by the greatness of his debts, as by resentment (419) at Galba's conduct towards him. For he did not conceal his conviction, "that he could not stand his ground unless he became emperor, and that it signified nothing whether he fell by the hands of his enemies in the field, or of his creditors in the Forum." He had a few days before squeezed out of one of the emperor's slaves a million of sesterces for procuring him a stewardship; and this was the whole fund he had for carrying on so great an enterprise. At first the design was entrusted to only five of the guard, but afterwards to ten others, each of the five naming two. They had every one ten thousand sesterces paid down, and were promised fifty thousand more. By these, others were drawn in, but not many; from a confident assurance, that when the matter came to the crisis, they should have enough to join them.

VI. His first intention was, immediately after the departure of Piso, to seize the camp, and fall upon Galba,

whilst he was at supper in the palace; but he was restrained by a regard for the cohort at that time on duty, lest he should bring too great an odium upon it; because it happened that the same cohort was on guard before, both when Caius was slain, and Nero deserted. For some time afterwards, he was restrained also by scruples about the omens, and by the advice of Seleucus. Upon the day fixed at last for the enterprise, having given his accomplices notice to wait for him in the Forum near the temple of Saturn, at the gilded mile-stone [\[675\]](#), he went in the morning to pay his respects to Galba; and being received with a kiss as usual, he attended him at sacrifice, and heard the predictions of the augur [\[676\]](#). A freedman of his, then bringing (420) him word that the architects were come, which was the signal agreed upon, he withdrew, as if it were with a design to view a house upon sale, and went out by a back-door of the palace to the place appointed. Some say he pretended to be seized with an ague fit, and ordered those about him to make that excuse for him, if he was inquired after. Being then quickly concealed in a woman's litter, he made the best of his way for the camp. But the bearers growing tired, he got out, and began to run. His shoe becoming loose, he stopped again, but being immediately raised by his attendants upon their shoulders, and unanimously saluted by the title of EMPEROR, he came amidst auspicious acclamations and drawn swords into the Principia [\[677\]](#) in the camp; all who met him joining in the cavalcade, as if they had been privy to the design. Upon this, sending some soldiers to dispatch Galba and Piso, he said nothing else in his address to the soldiery, to secure their affections, than these few words: "I shall be content with whatever ye think fit to leave me."

VII. Towards the close of the day, he entered the senate, and after he had made a short speech to them, pretending that he had been seized in the streets, and compelled by violence to assume the imperial authority, which he designed to exercise in conjunction with them, he retired to the palace. Besides other compliments which he received from those who flocked about him to congratulate and flatter him, he was called Nero by the mob, and manifested no intention of declining that cognomen. Nay, some authors relate, that he used it in his official acts, and the first letters he sent to the (421) governors of provinces. He suffered all his images and statues to be replaced, and restored his procurators and freedmen to their former posts. And the first writing which he signed as emperor, was a promise of fifty millions of sesterces to finish the Golden-house [\[678\]](#). He is said to have been greatly frightened that night in his sleep, and to have groaned heavily; and being found, by

those who came running in to see what the matter was, lying upon the floor before his bed, he endeavoured by every kind of atonement to appease the ghost of Galba, by which he had found himself violently tumbled out of bed. The next day, as he was taking the omens, a great storm arising, and sustaining a grievous fall, he muttered to himself from time to time:

Ti gar moi kai makrois aulois; [679]

What business have I the loud trumpets to sound!

VIII. About the same time, the armies in Germany took an oath to Vitellius as emperor. Upon receiving this intelligence, he advised the senate to send thither deputies, to inform them, that a prince had been already chosen; and to persuade them to peace and a good understanding. By letters and messages, however, he offered Vitellius to make him his colleague in the empire, and his son-in-law. But a war being now unavoidable, and the generals and troops sent forward by Vitellius, advancing, he had a proof of the attachment and fidelity of the pretorian guards, which had nearly proved fatal to the senatorian order. It had been judged proper that some arms should be given out of the stores, and conveyed to the fleet by the marine troops. While they were employed in fetching these from the camp in the night, some of the guards suspecting treachery, excited a tumult; and suddenly the whole body, without any of their officers at their head, ran to the palace, demanding that the entire senate should be put to the sword; and having repulsed some of the (422) tribunes who endeavoured to stop them, and slain others, they broke, all bloody as they were, into the banquetting room, inquiring for the emperor; nor would they quit the place until they had seen him. He now entered upon his expedition against Vitellius with great alacrity, but too much precipitation, and without any regard to the ominous circumstances which attended it. For the Ancilia [680] had been taken out of the temple of Mars, for the usual procession, but were not yet replaced; during which interval it had of old been looked upon as very unfortunate to engage in any enterprise. He likewise set forward upon the day when the worshippers of the Mother of the gods [681] begin their lamentations and wailing. Besides these, other unlucky omens attended him. For, in a victim offered to Father Dis [682], he found the signs such as upon all other occasions are regarded as favourable; whereas, in that sacrifice, the contrary intimations are judged the most propitious. At

his first setting forward, he was stopped by inundations of the Tiber; and at twenty miles' distance from the city, found the road blocked up by the fall of houses.

IX. Though it was the general opinion that it would be proper to protract the war, as the enemy were distressed by (423) famine and the straitness of their quarters, yet he resolved with equal rashness to force them to an engagement as soon as possible; whether from impatience of prolonged anxiety, and in the hope of bringing matters to an issue before the arrival of Vitellius, or because he could not resist the ardour of the troops, who were all clamorous for battle. He was not, however, present at any of those which ensued, but stayed behind at Brixellum [683]. He had the advantage in three slight engagements, near the Alps, about Placentia, and a place called Castor's [684]; but was, by a fraudulent stratagem of the enemy, defeated in the last and greatest battle, at Bedriacum [685]. For, some hopes of a conference being given, and the soldiers being drawn up to hear the conditions of peace declared, very unexpectedly, and amidst their mutual salutations, they were obliged to stand to their arms. Immediately upon this he determined to put an end to his life, more, as many think, and not without reason, out of shame, at persisting in a struggle for the empire to the hazard of the public interest and so many lives, than from despair, or distrust of his troops. For he had still in reserve, and in full force, those whom he had kept about him for a second trial of his fortune, and others were coming up from Dalmatia, Pannonia, and Moesia; nor were the troops lately defeated so far discouraged as not to be ready, even of themselves, to run all risks in order to wipe off their recent disgrace.

X. My father, Suetonius Lenis [686], was in this battle, being at (424) that time an angusticlavian tribune in the thirteenth legion. He used frequently to say, that Otho, before his advancement to the empire, had such an abhorrence of civil war, that once, upon hearing an account given at table of the death of Cassius and Brutus, he fell into a trembling, and that he never would have interfered with Galba, but that he was confident of succeeding in his enterprise without a war. Moreover, that he was then encouraged to despise life by the example of a common soldier, who bringing news of the defeat of the army, and finding that he met with no credit, but was railed at for a liar and a coward, as if he had run away from the field of battle, fell upon his sword at the emperor's feet; upon the sight of which, my father said that Otho cried out, "that he would expose to no farther danger such brave men, who had deserved so well at his hands." Advising therefore his brother,

his brother's son, and the rest of his friends, to provide for their security in the best manner they could, after he had embraced and kissed them, he sent them away; and then withdrawing into a private room by himself, he wrote a letter of consolation to his sister, containing two sheets. He likewise sent another to Messalina, Nero's widow, whom he had intended to marry, committing to her the care of his relics and memory. He then burnt all the letters which he had by him, to prevent the danger and mischief that might otherwise befall the writers from the conqueror. What ready money he had, he distributed among his domestics.

XI. And now being prepared, and just upon the point of dispatching himself, he was induced to suspend the execution of his purpose by a great tumult which had broken out in the camp. Finding that some of the soldiers who were making off had been seized and detained as deserters, "Let us add," said he, "this night to our life." These were his very words. He then gave orders that no violence should be offered to any one; and keeping his chamber-door open until late at night, he allowed all who pleased the liberty to come and see him. At last, after quenching his thirst with a draught of cold water, he took up two poniards, and having examined the points of both, put one of them under his pillow, and shutting his chamber-door, slept very soundly, until, awaking about break of day, he stabbed himself under the left pap. Some persons bursting into the room upon his first groan, he at one time covered, and at another exposed his wound to the view of the bystanders, and thus life soon ebbed away. His funeral was hastily performed, according to his own order, in the thirty-eighth year of his age, and ninety-fifth day of his reign. [\[687\]](#)

XII. The person and appearance of Otho no way corresponded to the great spirit he displayed on this occasion; for he is said to have been of low stature, splay-footed, and bandy-legged. He was, however, effeminately nice in the care of his person: the hair on his body he plucked out by the roots; and because he was somewhat bald, he wore a kind of peruke, so exactly fitted to his head, that nobody could have known it for such. He used to shave every day, and rub his face with soaked bread; the use of which he began when the down first appeared upon his chin, to prevent his having any beard. It is said likewise that he celebrated publicly the sacred rites of Isis [\[688\]](#), clad in a linen garment, such as is used by the worshippers of that goddess. These circumstances, I imagine, caused the world to wonder the more that his death was so little in character with his life. Many of the soldiers who were present, kissing and bedewing with their tears his hands and feet as he lay dead, and

celebrating him as "a most gallant man, and an incomparable emperor," immediately put an end to their own lives upon the spot, not far from his funeral pile. (426) Many of those likewise who were at a distance, upon hearing the news of his death, in the anguish of their hearts, began fighting amongst themselves, until they dispatched one another. To conclude: the generality of mankind, though they hated him whilst living, yet highly extolled him after his death; insomuch that it was the common talk and opinion, "that Galba had been driven to destruction by his rival, not so much for the sake of reigning himself, as of restoring Rome to its ancient liberty."

COMMENTARY

It is remarkable, in the fortune of this emperor, that he owed both his elevation and catastrophe to the inextricable embarrassments in which he was involved; first, in respect of pecuniary circumstances, and next, of political. He was not, so far as we can learn, a follower of any of the sects of philosophers which justified, and even recommended suicide, in particular cases: yet he perpetrated that act with extraordinary coolness and resolution; and, what is no less remarkable, from the motive, as he avowed, of public expediency only. It was observed of him, for many years after his death, that "none ever died like Otho."

FOOTNOTES

[670]

On the esplanade, where the standards, objects of religious reverence, were planted. See note to c. vi. Criminals were usually executed outside the Vallum, and in the presence of a centurion.

[671]

Probably one of the two mentioned in CLAUDIUS, c. xiii.

[672]

A.U.C. 784 or 785.

[673]

"Distento sago impositum in sublime jactare."

[674]

See NERO, c. xxxv.

[675]

The Milliare Aureum was a pillar of stone set up at the top of the Forum, from which all the great military roads throughout Italy started, the distances to the principal towns being marked upon it. Dio (lib. liv.) says that it was erected by the emperor Augustus, when he was curator of the roads.

[676]

Haruspex, Auspex, or Augur, denoted any person who foretold futurity, or interpreted omens. There was at Rome a body of priests, or college, under this title, whose office it was to foretell future events, chiefly from the flight, chirping, or feeding of birds, and from other appearances. They were of the greatest authority in the Roman state; for nothing of importance was done in public affairs, either at home or abroad, in peace or war, without consulting them. The Romans derived the practice of augury chiefly from the Tuscans; and anciently their youth used to be instructed as carefully in this art, as afterwards they were in the Greek literature. For this purpose, by a decree of the senate, a certain number of the sons of the leading men at Rome was sent to the twelve states of Etruria for instruction.

[677]

See before, note, c. i. The Principia was a broad open space, which separated the lower part of the Roman camp from the upper, and extended the whole breadth of the camp. In this place was erected the tribunal of the general, when he either administered justice or harangued the

army. Here likewise the tribunes held their courts, and punishments were inflicted. The principal standards of the army, as it has been already mentioned, were deposited in the Principia; and in it also stood the altars of the gods, and the images of the Emperors, by which the soldiers swore.

[678]

See NERO, c. xxxi. The sum estimated as requisite for its completion amounted to 2,187,500 pounds of our money.

[679]

The two last words, literally translated, mean "long trumpets;" such as were used at sacrifices. The sense is, therefore, "What have I to do, my hands stained with blood, with performing religious ceremonies!"

[680]

The Ancile was a round shield, said to have fallen from heaven in the reign of Numa, and supposed to be the shield of Mars. It was kept with great care in the sanctuary of his temple, as a symbol of the perpetuity of the Roman empire; and that it might not be stolen, eleven others were made exactly similar to it.

[681]

This ideal personage, who has been mentioned before, AUGUSTUS, c. lxviii., was the goddess Cybele, the wife of Saturn, called also Rhea, Ops, Vesta, Magna, Mater, etc. She was painted as a matron, crowned with towers, sitting in a chariot drawn by lions. A statue of her, brought from Pessinus in Phrygia to Rome, in the time of the second Punic war, was much honoured there. Her priests, called the Galli and Corybantes, were castrated; and worshipped her with the sound of drums, tabors, pipes, and cymbals. The rites of this goddess were disgraced by great indecencies.

[682]

Otherwise called Orcus, Pluto, Jupiter Infernus, and Stygnis. He was the brother of Jupiter, and king of the infernal regions. His wife was Proserpine, the daughter of Ceres, whom he carried off as she was gathering flowers in the plains of Enna, in Sicily. The victims offered to the infernal gods were black: they were killed with their faces bent downwards; the knife was applied from below, and the blood was poured into a ditch.

[683]

A town between Mantua and Cremona.

[684]

The temple of Castor. It stood about twelve miles from Cremona. Tacitus gives some details of this action. Hist. ii. 243.

[685]

Both Greek and Latin authors differ in the mode of spelling the name of this place, the first syllable being written Beb, Bet, and Bret. It is now a small village called Labino, between Cremona and Verona.

[686]

Lenis was a name of similar signification with that of Tranquillus, borne by his son, the author of the present work. We find from Tacitus, that there was, among Otho's generals, in this battle, another person of the name of Suetonius, whose cognomen was Paulinus; with whom our author's father must not be confounded. Lenis was only a tribune of the thirteenth legion, the position of which in the battle is mentioned by Tacitus, Hist. xi. 24, and was angusticlavus, wearing only the narrow stripe, as not being of the senatorial order; while Paulinus was a general, commanding a legion, at least, and a consular man; having filled that Office A.U.C. 818. There seems no doubt that Suetonius Paulinus was the same general who distinguished himself by his successes and cruelties in Britain. NERO, c. xviii., and note. Not to extend the present note, we may shortly refer to our author's having already mentioned his grandfather (CALIGULA, c. xix.); besides other sources from which he drew his information. He tells us that

he himself was then a boy. We have now arrived at the times in which his father bore a part. Such incidental notices, dropped by historical writers, have a certain value in enabling us to form a judgment on the genuineness of their narratives as to contemporaneous, or recent, events.

[687]
A.U.C. 823.

[688]
Jupiter, to prevent the discovery of his amour with Io, the daughter of the river Inachus, transformed her into a heifer, in which metamorphosis she was placed by Juno under the watchful inspection of Argus; but flying into Egypt, and her keeper being killed by Mercury, she recovered her human shape, and was married to Osiris. Her husband afterwards became a god of the Egyptians, and she a goddess, under the name of Isis. She was represented with a mural crown on her head, a cornucopia in one hand, and a sistrum (a musical instrument) in the other.